**WELCOME SPEECH**

**FOR**

**ANDRE WASHINGTON**

Hello everyone and welcome to this interesting, enlightening, and vital event. (**If there is anyone you would like to acknowledge for organizing or coordinating the event, you can do that here**). I would like to thank all of you for demonstrating your support and interest in our organization. There are several people that I would like to acknowledge who provided their valuable time to see to it that this evening provides a forum for everyone interested, no matter your allegiance or alliance. To \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, thank you for your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. To \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ we want to express our gratitude for your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

For the past several months, we have all witnessed "democracy" in action as well as the urgency of having our voices and opinions heard, and no matter what side of the political arena you find yourself, we are all united as one American community. As Senator Barbara Boxer has said, "I am sure that everyone of my colleagues - Democrat, Republican, and Independent - agrees with that statement.... that in the voting booth, **EVERYONE** is equal." If there is one thing we have witnessed lately, it's that people want to be counted. The best and most direct way to achieve that is to vote.

When we're young children we start learning expressions like, "civic duty" and "civic pride," but we never quite understand the meaning until we mature a little and face challenges that threaten to keep us from living our best and most authentic and free lives. Every day we hear stories of division and conflict and most of the time we feel powerless to do something... I am sure some of us.... probably **ALL** of us.... at one time or another feels like giving up because the thought of standing up and being counted seems just too daunting and useless.

**THAT IS NOT TRUE.** No matter who you are.... no matter your beliefs, your affiliations, or your endorsements, **EVERY SINGLE PERSON COUNTS. LITERALLY.** Being a card carrying member of the "silent majority" is no longer "a look" that suits ANY of us! I'm not suggesting that everyone here run for public office... that would get **REALLY** crowded and confusing!!! (**Wait for the laugh**), but I **AM** urging all of you to be counted. How does that happen? You need to register to vote.... and then, on Election Day or Primary Day.... Do your duty to make your conscience a part of the collective vote!

The NAACP was formed over one hundred years ago with a **PURPOSE**. Our mission and vision are simple and supportive: "To ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of all citizens." That includes **YOU**. It's been said that "Voting is the expression of our commitment to ourselves, one another, this country, and this world." It is our turn to stand up and be counted.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt taught us that, " Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves... and the only way they could do this is by not voting." Really. Think about it. What good reason could you possibly have to **NOT** vote? It's not like it's a burden on a regular basis... at worst it's a commitment of a couple of hours once a year. Yes... keep in mind that local and regional and state elections are as important as Presidential and national elections... every opportunity to vote is important. What kind of considerations do you have for not registering to vote and then to vote? Everything possible is being done to support you in making your voice... yes **YOUR** VOICE (**Point to some people in the crowd)** HEARD.... In fact, Ohio now has online voting registration. It's as convenient as downloading the Ohio Secretary of State's website to your phone or tablet and registering.... your path to making your vote count is **RIGHT IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND!!!**

Jesse Williams once shared some wisdom, "If someone says, 'Democracy is a sham, those people don't speak for me... the system is rigged,' you say, 'Vote.' Someone says, 'I was making a statement by not voting.' and then you say, 'WELL I CAN'T HEAR IT." There is no longer any acceptable excuse for not voting. NOT voting sends a message.... it tells us that by you not exercising your beliefs and endorsements, the exact opposite of what you might want will surely happen. We are in the middle of one of the most historically volatile political cycles this country has ever witnessed. This is **NOT THE TIME** to sit this one out! Find the way to make a pledge to yourself, make a pact with your family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues....start a pool.... set up a challenge... see which neighborhood in your community can have the most voter registrations....and then pledge to vote and to make that vote count!

You are here because you set an example for others. We know that at the heart of our connection, we are a strong and tightly bonded community. We know we come together when necessary- as neighbors, friends, fellow church goers.... and now we must unite as **VOTERS**. It's so urgent to set an example... especially to the youth in our communities. It's so important for our younger citizens... those entering the age of young adulthood, to really feel and understand that voting is our right as Americans. It is not okay to let someone else do the work and then wonder why things don't go as we would want. It's time to GET UP... LOOK UP... LEARN about the issues and candidates whose choices and policies will have an effect on your quality of life, and VOTE.

Remember the words of President Ronald Reagan who said, "Government's first duty is to protect the people, not run their lives." The way that is achieved is for the people..... and that means YOU... to exercise the right to vote.

Back in the times of the Revolutionary War, Noah Webster, one of the members of the Continental Congress and considered to be "The Father of American Scholarship and Education" said, "In selecting men for office, let principle be your guide. Regard not the particular sect or denomination of the candidate- look to his character....." To be able to vote is a part of being an American. Shirley Chisholm, the first female African American member of Congress and actually the first woman to entertain a run for the President of the United States said, "I don't measure America by its achievement but by its **potential**." Each one of you holds the potential to make your position and take your stand by voting and by encouraging your fellow community members to vote as well. It's been said that if someone tries to deprive you of your rights, you've got to resist. The way to resist is to be counted... to vote. Never forget this wisdom from Congresswoman Chisholm.... "Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this earth." We have earned the right to vote. That is our expression of service. It's time we all get out, register, and make our voices heard.

Thank you all!